

The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

Cathy Halliburton Halter, EMT-P



Cathy Halliburton Halter is a paramedic shift captain and education coordinator for Hopkins County EMS in Sulphur Springs.

What was your first day on the job in EMS?

I started my EMS career as an EMT-B in May 1982. I was so excited, but scared at the same time! Two weeks prior to the day I started on the truck as an EMT were spent as an "orientation period." There were eleven other members of Hopkins County EMS getting started for the first time. At that time you didn't actually have to be certified as an ECA or EMT. An American Red Cross First Aid certification was okay. Out of the twelve who started in 1982 only three of us were already EMTs. Prior to May of 1982 the local funeral homes ran the ambulance service here in Sulphur Springs and Hopkins County, but with new regulations and standards coming from Medicare and TDH it was time for a change. The Sulphur Springs Fire Department agreed to take on

the ambulance service for one year and then Hopkins County Memorial Hospital would begin providing ambulance service to the county in May of 1983. My first day, my first week on the job . . . it all started with a fatality accident and a heart attack. Other than that, it was spent anxiously awaiting the next call and getting to know the area.

Which services have you worked for over the years?

When I was 16 years old and living in Dickson, Tennessee, I found out about an explorer post that was sponsored by the local rescue squad. The thought of becoming a firefighter was pretty exciting. After spending about five years as a member of the Dickson County Rescue Squad Explorer Post and then as an actual member of the DCRS, I decided that

EMS would be a better choice. I completed an EMT course there but was unable to find a job. There were very few females working in EMS in that area in those days. Family members here in Texas told me about the positions opening up with the ambulance service run by the Sulphur Springs Fire Department. So I headed for Texas, went in for an interview and got the job that day! I started with SSFD and worked with them for one year and then Hopkins County Memorial Hospital took over in May of 1983. And I have been there ever since. During a kind of burnt-out phase, I completed training at the local police academy. At the time, I thought that after about 10 years of EMS it was time to move on and law enforcement was a good option. But in the end I just couldn't turn loose of EMS.

Why did you get into EMS?

I think several EMS folks of my generation will tell you that "Johnny and Roy" had a lot to do with their decision to get into emergency services. I will admit, I was hooked on those guys. They were my heroes! The lights and sirens, the excitement all sounded good, but I think it was more than that. I just somehow knew EMS was the thing for me. A friend once told me that I "had a calling" to do EMS. I won't go that far, but it has always felt right. I think the better question at this point may be: Why do I *stay* in EMS? That's pretty easy to explain. I love it. I do. I have gone through some periods of burn-out, but I love helping people, really helping them. So, after all these years I have stayed. Maybe that's why I got into EMS after all. I am a caregiver. It's what I need to do.

How has the field changed since you've been in it?

When I made my very first call I never dreamed that I would be providing the type of patient care we do now. One of my first ambulances was a converted cargo van. I always called it a flower delivery van because that's what it looked like! Just plain white with a blue light bar, a big antenna and "Ambulance" written backwards on the front of the hood. No portable radios, no phones and no one-man cots. No drugs, no monitors, no intubations and no protocols! How did

we ever manage? If we had to make transfers to Dallas or Tyler, we had a nurse go with us—especially for the babies. Around 1987 we began our push toward an ALS level of care. After a few years, 1992 or so, we began another push to MICU. That was a little harder because we really had to prove ourselves. By then we had several paramedics on staff. It was time to move on and we were ready! As time went by, we started using RSI, surgical cric, chest decompression and so on. As our service has evolved, we have established rather progressive patient care protocols, and we continue to look ahead. I love it when one of the younger medics says, "Tell me about the good ol' days." I'm always ready and willing to share the war stories.

Is there a particular moment or call that stands out?

It's odd how certain calls stand out and can be played back like a movie. The first time I had to deal with a death was at an automobile-pedestrian



Halter, center, works a scene in the summer of 1983. The patient was on his way home from a fishing tournament when his truck was hit in an intersection.

accident. I was 19 years old and can remember it like it was yesterday. I was responding with our rescue squad to call where a 12-year-old girl had been struck by a church bus after she exited the bus she was riding on. It was dark and raining. Her uncle was waiting for her at the end of the driveway. He saw her get hit. I recall arriving on scene and seeing her body covered by a sheet. I remember her uncle walking around the scene touching each person as he asked, "What are you waiting for? When are you going to do something? Why are you just standing around?" Another incident that stays with me, as I am sure it does with every emergency responder, is the 9/11 disaster. Even though I wasn't there, didn't work the scene and didn't know anyone involved, it still sticks with me. One of the hardest things was trying to find a way to tell my daughters what had happened. My daughters were ages 4 and 5 at that time. Young enough not to understand the absolute devastation, but yet old

enough to ask me if I could ever get hurt on a call like that.

What has been your favorite part of your career in EMS?

This is really a hard question to put an answer to! I love being able to help my patients and be an advocate for them. EMS is not just about driving fast and running the lights and siren. It's about making a difference in someone's life. It may be the patient, a family member or even a bystander. I enjoy teaching and sharing my experiences with the students. I have made some life-long friends while being involved in EMS. I get a thrill out of the fact that every single day I go on duty is a learning experience. That is what I would want to express to the new kids . . . you will learn something new every day. After you take that final test and get your certifications, there is still room to grow and to learn new things. That is what is so great about EMS and probably what has kept me hanging around for so long!